

# In Quest of Comfort:

## The Easy Chair in America

The Metropolitan Museum of Art



# In Quest of Comfort: The Easy Chair in America

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Catalogue by  
Morrison H. Heckscher  
Assistant Curator, American Wing

**Cover Illustrations:**

**Easy Chair**

**Philadelphia, about 1750-1790**

**Mahogany**

**Gift of Mrs. C. F. Dickson, 63.114**

**Easy Chair Frame**

**Philadelphia, about 1740-1790**

**Rogers Fund, 65.133**

## Acknowledgements

**In Quest of Comfort: The Easy Chair in America** (opening November 24, 1971) is the first in a series of small, didactic exhibitions prepared by the American Wing. Such small scale exhibitions focusing on specific topics will be held from time to time by this and other departments throughout the Museum. To best illustrate the themes, objects are selected not only from the department's permanent collections, but from other departments of the Museum and from other local institutions, collectors, and dealers.

This catalogue consists of two parts: first, five brief essays, each tracing a different theme illustrated by the exhibition; second, a check list of all the objects exhibited. Two aspects of the exhibition—the evolution of the easy chair form and an analysis of framing methods—are discussed in the December, 1971, issue of *Antiques* magazine at much greater length than is here possible.

I am grateful to the lenders to this exhibition—Mrs. James G. Bolling, the Brooklyn Museum; the Yale University Art Gallery, Ginsburg & Levy, Inc., and Israel Sack, Inc. For advice based upon long years of experience with American chairs, I am indebted

to the above-mentioned dealers. For the use of its incomparable Decorative Arts Photographic Collection I am indebted to the Henry Francis duPont Winterthur Museum and to Dwight Lanmon, Assistant Curator there. Wood analysis was performed by the Forest Service, United States Department of Agriculture. Within the Metropolitan Museum all the members of the American Wing, but especially Berry Tracy, Mary Glaze, Patrick Farry, and Ruth Gottlieb, have been of constant help.

The exhibition would not have been possible without the skillful work of members of the Conservation Department, specifically Charles Anello and John Canonico, Senior Restorers, respectively, of upholstery and woodwork, and Rudolph Colban, Assistant Restorer, woodwork. Mary Myers assisted with materials borrowed from the Print Department, and Peter Zellner guided the design of the exhibition. Publication of this catalogue was made possible by the Department of Public Education. Melanie Yaggy and Bret Waller assisted with its preparation as did Suzanne Boorsch of the Department of Public Affairs. Printing was done by the Office Services Department under the supervision of Charles Webberly.

## The Exhibition

The chairs in this exhibition were, with only two exceptions, made in America during the 18th or very early 19th century—that is, when the easy chair, or fully upholstered chair with “wings” attached to the back, was fashionable.

As you enter from the new musical instruments galleries you see directly ahead, over the mantelpiece, Copley's portrait of the aged Mrs. Powell who is ensconced in a vast, red easy chair. (If you entered from the American Wing, proceed through one gallery and look to your left.) Look at the pairs of chairs on either side of the fireplace. Those on the left were made in Philadelphia, those on the right in New England, about two hundred years ago.

One of each pair has had its later coverings removed so that the wooden framework is visible. You should be able to visualize in your own mind the hidden framework of the upholstered chairs, for each one of them is identical to that of the stripped chair next to it. Furthermore, you can see that the shape of the chairmaker's wooden frame determined what the upholsterer finally produced. The holes that pepper the exposed frames indicate where upholstery tacks were nailed into the frame. The exposed legs, of walnut or mahogany, are known as the primary wood. None of the rest of the woodwork was meant to be seen and consequently is called secondary wood. A great variety of less expensive species were used for secondary woods.

To the left of the door opposite this fireplace are two chairs made late in the 18th century and demonstrating a new arm and wing design. The stripped example shows how the arms were attached first and the wings added later, just the reverse of the manner of making the first pairs.

To the right of the door, two New York

chairs, both stripped, display how the “classic” 18th-century style was altered after 1800. The barrel-back chair is a sophisticated example that shows the first move away from wings independent of the back, while the other, with its exaggerated solid wings, is a pleasing country interpretation of the classic form.

When you walk into the other gallery you will see, on a pedestal in the center, the finest existing American easy chair. It was made in Newport, R.I., and retains all the original upholstery put on by one “Gardner Junr” in 1758. Two English chairs, showing the tradition from which the American chairs emerged, flank the doorway you just came through. Now look at the four chairs lined up on one wall. They illustrate the development of the easy chair in America during the 18th century. The first one, covered in blue cloth, was made about 1700 and is one of the earliest American easy chairs. The last, upholstered in red and white, was made about 1800 and shows not only how the easy chair form had changed but one of the more obvious uses to which these chairs were put.

Much can be learned about American easy chairs by looking at English pattern books, prints showing European chairs in use, and other contemporary sources. The cases on the opposite wall contain such objects, as well as photographs of chairs with their original upholstery and samples of upholstery materials.

This exhibition was arranged with the idea of investigating how American easy chairs, still so popular today, are related to English ones; how they were made in different colonial cities; how they were upholstered; and how they were originally used. Brief essays on each of these subjects appear in the following pages.

## Background and Development

With the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, comfort became a major concern in English court furniture. Chairs were fully upholstered, some even had reclining backs. Onto these chairs wings were attached to either side of the back so that, when reclining, the sitter could rest his head and sleep. By 1700 the classic "Queen Anne" easy chair (15) had evolved with its high and relatively narrow back, its arms ending in "C"s, and its legs joined together by turned stretchers. The form evolved further by about 1740 (16) with the later form demonstrating a lower but wider back, arms terminating in vertical cones, and legs standing free of stretchers. American makers adopted features of both the early and later English forms and used them until the end of the century (2-5).

Although the fully upholstered easy chair was still made in England after about 1740, it was no longer an object of fashion there. It was omitted altogether from such pattern books as Thomas Chippendale's *Director* of 1754. Consequently, the English form never evolved much beyond the flowing curves of the Queen Anne interpretation. The mid-century trade card (19) of the upholsterer Thomas Ridgeway shows a chair with all the curves of the earlier Queen Anne style, while the influence of the

elaborate, asymmetrical French-inspired rococo of Chippendale, evident in the ornamental surround of the card, is almost totally lacking in the chair itself. The exposed wood ornamenting the crest rail, wings, and skirt of the easy chair in the background of the watercolor drawing (18) for the engraved trade card of John Stephens suggests a French rococo approach that was never executed in England or America.

English practice had no further influence on easy chair design until the publication of a design by George Hepplewhite (21) in 1787. Hepplewhite, a popularizer of the neo-classic style of the famous architect Robert Adam, introduced a dramatic change in the conception of the easy chair: he transformed it from a wing chair with arms attached to an armchair with wings added. American makers were quick to copy the new style (6,7).

Early in the nineteenth century, the idea that all upholstered easy chairs had to have wings was abandoned. Sheraton's *Encyclopedia* of 1803 (23) illustrates many of the new varieties, including the barrel-back or "tub" easy chair, which was also made in America (8). Since then, easy chairs have been designed in every imaginable form, all beyond the scope of this exhibition.

## Structure

Throughout the 18th century, regional schools of cabinet and chair manufacturing existed in America, whereas in England all furniture styles originated in London. Until about 1740 the chief chair making centers were in New England: especially Boston and Portsmouth, N.H. (11,12). Thereafter, Newport, R.I. (10), rose to prominence and Philadelphia (2,3) to pre-eminence. At the end of the century New York City (8) assumed a leadership in the design and manufacture of American furniture that it was to keep for one hundred years.

Classic examples of the basic mid-century types as made in New England and Philadelphia are juxtaposed on either side of the fireplace over which Copley's portrait of Mrs. Powell presides. The upper frameworks of these chairs, one of which has been stripped so as to be fully exposed,



are identical. The front legs of the Philadelphia chairs are identical to those found on the standard side and armchairs made in that region: one (3) is a plain slipper foot of walnut in the Queen Anne style; the other (2) is richly carved mahogany and ends in a claw and ball foot in the Chippendale style. Both types of legs were available from about 1740 to 1790, but a chair with carved mahogany legs cost more than one with plain walnut ones. A chair with carved mahogany legs like that exhibited here (2) cost £2-15-0; one with plain walnut legs (3) cost £2-5-0. The same holds true for the two New England chairs, the one with its original upholstery (4) having plain walnut legs, the stripped frame (5) having richly carved mahogany legs.

Exposed, the frames of Philadelphia and New England chairs show as many differ-

ences as do their legs. First, the juncture of front legs and seat rails is dramatically different. Two drawings (28A&B) show how the joints work—in New England the seat rails are tenoned into the top of the leg; in Philadelphia the seat rails are lap-joined and then the leg is dovetailed into both rails.

These structural variations resulted from the differences in finish design: the rounded front of the seat in Philadelphia chairs (3) precluded use of the straight-forward New England front leg and seat construction (5). The complex "C"-shaped arm of the Philadelphia chairs is entirely different from the New England arm, which is simply a vertical cone topped by a flat armrest. The wooden structures forming each of these arm types are equally different, as



another pair of drawings demonstrate (28C&D).

Finally, the manner of joining the rear leg to the vertical support of the chair back shows fewer, but nonetheless distinctive, regional variations between Philadelphia and New England makers (28E&F).

The method of construction changed dramatically when Hepplewhite introduced his new saddle cheek chair in 1787. The shapely curved wings were now attached to the top of the arms (7) rather than the arms to the wings (3,5). However, these chairs varied less in their upholstered form from locale to locale than had the earlier chairs. Regional variations in framework construction are correspondingly less noticeable.

New methods of construction were required to produce chairs in the many vari-

ant easy chair types that emerged at the beginning of the 19th century. The frame of a New York tub or barrel-back chair (8) shows how the curved back was held together: the crest rail is made up of seven one-inch layers of pine, laminated together and then cut out to form the required shape. The front surface is rough (it was to be covered with stuffing), but the back surface is smoothly finished (it was to be covered only with a layer of fabric).

There are, of course, many exceptions to these standard methods of easy chair construction. Some of the more rural makers solved the structural problems in their own imaginative way — witness the chair from New York State with arms and wings made up of single pine boards (9).



## Upholstery

Many 18th-century easy chair frames survive, but few retain even portions of their original upholstery. The two chairs exhibited here with upholstery entirely intact (**4** and **10**) appear to be the only such American survivors.

The general 18th-century method of padding chairs in preparation for finish upholstery is demonstrated by fragments displayed here. The webbing and stuffing (**31**) originally on the back of the New Jersey saddle cheek chair (**7**) is displayed in a case so that the different layers and their arrangement all are visible. First, the jute webbing was nailed to the top, bottom, and sides of the back. Second, a layer of canvas (half jute and half burlap) was placed over the webbing and nailed to the framing members. Third, stuffing was added—a combination of horse hair, hog hair, bamboo shoots, straw, swampmoss and excelsior were the usual ingredients. Finally, all was tightly covered with another layer of canvas, to which the stuffing was basted with cord. The back was then ready for the finish fabric.

Photographs (**29**) of a chair inscribed with the name of "J. Pope," a Boston cabinetmaker, demonstrate how such upholstery looks in place—the back seen from behind, showing webbing, inner canvas, and basting (**29A**), and the front showing the covered stuffing (**29B**). The identical procedure was followed in preparing the other inner surfaces of the chair for their final covering, but the upper surfaces of the wings, arms, and the upper front seat rail usually had their edges built up with a roll of rushes or straw to soften the sharp wooden edges and to contain the stuffing. The six pictures (**29**) of the Pope chair display the method employed, as well as showing the stuffing of one arm and wing removed, and the canvas turned back to

show a large, and as yet unexplained, "J" (**29F**).

Embroidered needlework was popular for 18th-century chair covering. The wool stitched into canvas made a combination sturdier than any other fabric then in use. Numerous English and European examples—such as the English chair (**15**) with the "Meeting of David before Saul" worked into the back—exist on their original frames, but there is only one American easy chair needlepoint covering known to be intact on its frame (**10**). This is a chair made in Newport, R.I., and, according to an inscription on the frame, upholstered by one "Gardner Junr" in 1758. The needlepoint is worked in an all-over flamestitch pattern, except for the back side of the chair to which is attached an idyllic arca-dian scene, done in crewel embroidery.

The more delicate fabrics with which many easy chairs were originally covered have not survived. Numerous contemporary references, such as the trade card of the English upholsterer Thomas Ridgeway (**19**), indicate the most popular materials: the costly silk damasks and the cheaper wool harrateens or moreens. Silk damask seldom survives two hundred years if sat upon, but one chair with its original damask was photographed before re-upholstery. The material was in tatters (**30A&B**), but a fragment of the rich yellow fabric (**30C**) retains its original beauty. The back was covered with a cheaper fabric, probably a worsted damask (**30D**).

Damasks, or fabrics with a design woven into them, were also made of wool. Joseph Cox's advertisement in the *New York Gazette*, 1768, refers to the importation of English "Worsted Damasks, Moreens, Harrateens" and other fabrics. No wing chairs are known with their original wool damask, but the second of the two chairs with all

original upholstery is covered with its original wool moreen or harrateen—with watered, waved, and figured designs pressed into the fabric (4). The faded pink material was once the bright color of the area underneath the cushion. Crimson or red was the most popular color for chair fabrics (1,2,4), and yellow and green came next.

The original piping or welting treatment of the upper edges of the arms, wings, and crest rail remain in the two fully preserved New England chairs (4,10) already discussed. Fragments of the inch-wide tape sewn over the piping are visible upon care-

ful inspection. An alternative edging treatment, employing decorative brass-headed nails, can be shown only in a photograph (30A).

American easy chairs were as elegantly upholstered as their English counterparts; before the Revolution most of the upholsterers were English-trained, and, as proved by the label of John Cox, "Upholsterer, From London" (24), proud of it. All too often their successors have not had original specimens to guide them in their reupholstering efforts.

## Usage

The easy chair was designed for comfort. All the surfaces touched by the sitter were fully upholstered, and the seat was roomy enough to move around in. The wings, projecting out from either side of the top of the back, provided headrests for sleeping and protection from cold drafts or the direct heat of open fires.

Many, if not most, easy chairs were originally made with potty seats or, as they were called in the cabinetmakers' price books (26,27), "close stools." The butt ends of the slides supporting the board holding the pot are all that remain on a stripped-down frame in this exhibit (9), but the seat remains intact in an upholstered example (14).

During the 18th century easy chairs were expensive to buy and were generally reserved for use by the aged and sick, who might remain seated all day. In their *Practical Cabinet Maker* (22) (London,

1827), the Nicholson brothers proudly illustrate the custom-made easy chair to which Frederick August (1763-1827), Duke of York and Commander-in-Chief of the British army, was confined for the last six months of his life while suffering from severe dropsy. For his clients whose overindulgence in port had brought on gout, George Hepplewhite would make "gouty stools" to accompany his easy chairs (21). The connotation of age and illness was so great that the easy chair was almost never used as background material in English and American portraiture. When John Singleton Copley of Boston painted 82-year-old Mrs. John Powell in 1764 (1), he seated the shrunken widow in a vast easy chair as a device for enhancing the real theme of the picture—the essence of great age.

Inventories of household goods suggest that in the 18th century easy chairs were

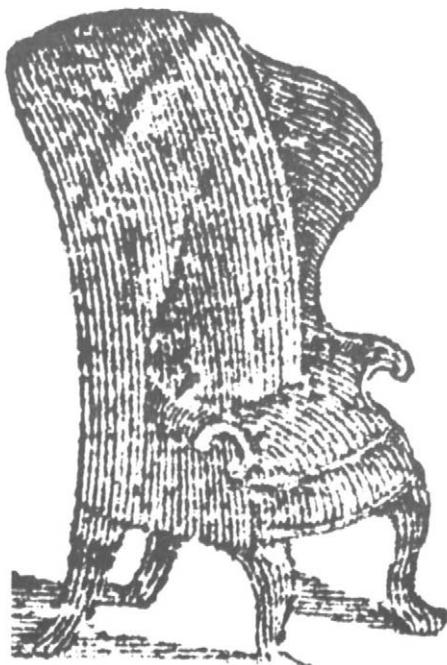
almost always placed in upstairs bedchambers. Etchings by Daniel Chodowiecki (often called the German Hogarth) show these chairs most often placed next to the beds, and only infrequently in the best parlor, next to the fireplace as the chosen chair for the head of the household. Although contemporary illustrations do not exist, the same usage probably prevailed in America. In the 19th century the easy chair was often relegated to the attic; in our own time, with a heightened appreciation for the beauty and utility of these chairs, they have been brought out to a place of honor in our best rooms.

ADVERTISEMENT OF THOMAS  
HEWES, UPHOLSTERER

From the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July  
24, 1766

Photograph

Courtesy of *The New-York Historical  
Society, New York City*



THOMAS HEWES'  
UPHOLSTERER,

Is removed from Chestnut into  
Market-street, five Doors below  
the New-Printing-Office,

WHERE he continues to  
make and sell, all Sorts  
of Upholsterers Work, in the neat-  
est and newest Fashions, at the  
most reasonable Prices, such as  
Beds and Window Curtains, Easy  
Chairs, Couches, Matrasses, either  
of Hair or Wool, Feather Beds,  
Sacking Bottoms, Chair Bottoms  
and Ship Stools, &c. &c.

Those that are pleased to favour  
him with their Custom, may de-  
pend on Care and Dispatch. 6 W.

# Catalogue

1. John Singleton Copley  
(American, 1738-1815)

MRS. JOHN POWELL

Oil on canvas, about 1764

Lent by Yale University Art Gallery  
Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, '03

## 2. EASY CHAIR

Mahogany; secondary woods black  
walnut, yellow poplar, and pine. Up-  
holstered in 18th-century silk damask

Philadelphia, about 1750-1790

Gift of Mrs. C. F. Dickson, 63.114

## 3. EASY CHAIR FRAME

Walnut; secondary woods cherry, red  
oak, ash, and yellow pine

Philadelphia, about 1740-1790

Purchase, Rogers Fund, 65.133

## 4. EASY CHAIR

Walnut. Original upholstery of watered,  
waved, and figured wool

New England, about 1740-1790

Lent by the Brooklyn Museum  
Henry L. Batterman Fund and others,  
32.38

## 5. EASY CHAIR FRAME

Mahogany; secondary woods maple,  
red maple, and eastern white pine

Massachusetts, about 1750-1790

Purchase, Friends of the American  
Wing Fund, 67.114.2

## 6. EASY CHAIR

Mahogany; secondary woods birch (?)  
and pine. Upholstered in 18th-cen-  
tury camlet (wool and silk)

New England, about 1790-1810

Gift of George Coe Graves, The  
Sylmaris Collection, 31.53.3

## 7. EASY CHAIR FRAME

Black cherry; secondary woods bass-  
wood, yellow poplar, yellow pine,  
and eastern white pine

Probably New Jersey, about 1790-1810

Bequest of Edith Holden, 67.53.1

## 8. BARREL-BACK CHAIR FRAME

Mahogany; secondary woods chestnut,  
pine, and poplar

New York, about 1800-1810

Lent by Mrs. James G. Bolling

## 9. EASY CHAIR FRAME

Mahogany; secondary woods chestnut  
and pine

New York State, about 1790-1820

Lent by Ginsburg & Levy, Inc.

## 10. EASY CHAIR

Walnut; secondary wood maple. Original upholstery by "Gardner Junr," of Florentine and crewel embroidery

Newport, Rhode Island, 1758

Gift of Mrs. J. Insley Blair, 50.228.3

## 11. EASY CHAIR

Maple; secondary woods oak and poplar. Upholstered in 18th-century resist-dyed cotton

New England, about 1700

Gift of Mrs. J. Insley Blair, 50.228.1

## 12. EASY CHAIR

Walnut; secondary woods maple, poplar, and beech. Upholstered in modern brocatelle (cotton or linen and silk)

New England, about 1720

Purchase, Dick Fund, 35.117

## 13. EASY CHAIR

Mahogany; secondary woods oak, poplar, and yellow pine. Upholstered in modern cotton and silk damask

New York, about 1750-1790

Purchase, Kennedy Fund, 18.110.25

## 14. EASY CHAIR

Mahogany; secondary woods white

oak and yellow pine. Upholstered in 18th-century copper plate printed cotton

New England, about 1790-1810

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William A. Moore, 23.80.4

## 15. EASY CHAIR

Beech. Upholstered in 18th-century embroidery

England, about 1700

Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 55.8.2

## 16. EASY CHAIR

Walnut. Upholstered in 18th century silk damask

England, about 1740

Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 50.186

## 17. PHOTOGRAPH OF EASY CHAIR FRAME

England, about 1740

Photograph

Courtesy Messrs. Phillips of Hitchin

## 18. TRADE CARD OF JOHN STEPHENS, UPHOLSTERER

Ink and wash

Bristol, England, about 1750-1760

Gift of Mrs. Morris Hawkes, 27.100.3 (245)

19. TRADE CARD OF THOMAS RIDGEWAY, UPHOLSTERER  
Engraving and etching  
British, about 1750  
Gift of Mrs. Morris Hawkes, 27.100.3 (249)

20. Daniel Chodowiecki  
(German, 1726-1801)  
MISCELLANEOUS ETCHINGS,  
About 1779-1800  
Gift of Junius S. Morgan, 23.74

21. George Hepplewhite  
(British, died 1786)  
EASY CHAIR and GOUTY STOOL  
Plate 15 in *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*  
Etching and engraving, 1787  
Purchase, Rogers Fund, 1917  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art Library

22. Peter and Michel Angelo Nicholson  
(British, active early 19th century)  
"THE CHAIR IN WHICH THE LATE DUKE OF YORK DIED"  
Plate in *The Practical Cabinet Maker*  
Engraving and colored wash, 1827  
Purchase, Rogers Fund, 1918  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art Library

23. Thomas Sheraton  
(British, 1751-1806)  
VARIOUS EASY CHAIRS  
Plate 8 in *The Cabinet Dictionary*  
Etching, 1803  
Purchase, Rogers Fund, 52.519.26

24. LABEL OF JOSEPH COX,  
UPHOLSTERER  
New York, about 1757-1760  
Gift of Mrs. John J. Riker, 32.51.2

25. ADVERTISEMEMENT OF THOMAS HEWES, UPHOLSTERER  
From the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 24, 1766  
Photograph  
Courtesy of *The New-York Historical Society*, New York City

26. "EASY CHAIRS"  
Page 79 of *The Journeymen Cabinet & Chair Makers' New-York Book of Prices*, New York, 1796  
Purchase, Whittelsey Fund, 59.632

27. "A CIRCULAR BACK EASY CHAIR"  
Page 110 of *The New-York Book of Prices for Manufacturing Cabinet and Chair Work*, New York, 1817  
Purchase, Dick Fund, 51.538.1

**28. CONSTRUCTION DETAILS**

A comparison of Philadelphia and New England methods for constructing easy chair frames

A&B. Joint of front legs and seat rails of chairs numbered 3 and 5.

C&D. Construction of arm rests and juncture with wings of chairs numbered 3 and 5.

E&F. Joint of rear legs, back stiles, and seat rails of chairs numbered 3 and 5.

Sketches by Gillian Wilson

**29. PHOTOGRAPHS OF EASY CHAIR**

Walnut. Original webbing and stuffing on back, wings, and arms

Boston, about 1770. Inscribed on frame  
"J. Pope"

All photographs courtesy the Henry Francis duPont Winterthur Museum

**30. PHOTOGRAPHS (AND PIECE OF FABRIC) OF EASY CHAIR**

Mahogany. Original upholstery of yellow silk damask

New England, about 1790-1810

Photographs and fabric courtesy of Israel Sack, Inc.

**31. FOUNDATION UPHOLSTERY**

(Removed from the back of chair, catalogue 7)

Probably New Jersey, about 1790-1810

Bequest of Edith Holden, 67.53.1

